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ABSTRACT

Slowly, some universities are beginning to shift towards a new paradigm, the "learning paradigm," that proposes that institutions of higher learning exist not to provide instruction but instead to produce learning. The learning paradigm focuses on teaching critical thinking skills as life skills. If a university follows the learning paradigm, critical thinking is not offered as "a course" or a selection of courses in the core curriculum, but is incorporated into every college course. If this paradigm were to assume dominance at universities, this paper contends, not only would the work of university faculty be significantly different, but this shift would also affect the responsibilities of university administrators and students, as well as local community members. The paper states that although most agree that the public's confidence in the university has eroded, too few solutions have been offered, and one possible step towards addressing these public concerns is for administrators, faculty, and students to redirect their efforts towards the learning paradigm. It proposes encouraging a shift towards the learning paradigm in these ways: (1) faculty members should teach critical thinking skills in all courses in the curriculum; (2) faculty members should incorporate service-learning components into course assignments whenever possible; and (3) administrators should encourage faculty to refocus their research to address community concerns. The paper then discusses these proposals. (Contains 24 references.) (NKA)

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by David Alan Sapp

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Critical Thinking, Community Service, and Participatory Research: Restructuring the American University for a Framework of Learning

by David Alan Sapp

Introduction

The traditional, currently dominant paradigm in American higher education, known as the "instructional paradigm," holds that universities are institutions that exist to provide instruction to students. Slowly, however, some universities are beginning to shift towards a new paradigm, the "learning paradigm," that proposes that institutions of higher learning exist not to provide instruction but instead to produce learning. Supplementing the passive lecture format, in which faculty members talk and students mostly listen, with a pedagogical style that "creates environments...that bring students to discover and construct knowledge for themselves" (Barr & Tagg, 1995, p. 15), the learning paradigm focuses on teaching critical thinking skills as life skills.

If a university follows the learning paradigm, critical thinking is not offered as "a course" or a selection of courses in the core curriculum, but is incorporated into every college course. If this paradigm were to assume dominance at universities, as I believe it should, not only would the work of university faculty be significantly different, but this shift would also affect the responsibilities of university administrators and students, as well as local community members.

Making such a shift in higher education is difficult because of universities' political ties to the state and market. Making this shift necessitates many changes in the ways universities most often "train" students with skills for the workplace and conduct research for the marketplace. Although universities often graduate technically competent students, these schools need to change the ways in which they measure the quality of the degrees they offer, rewarding instruction and research that more directly addresses real-world problems. In this process, administration and tenure committees also need to value research that is done specifically for society as opposed to the typically more-lucrative research done for the state or market.

This refocus on the part of administrators and faculty members is one step towards helping students earn degrees that represent demonstrated knowledge and skills instead of accumulated credit hours. Students, under the learning paradigm, develop social imagination that makes it possible for them to question and analyze the world as well as imagine changing it. This paradigm, as Barr and Tagg (1995) show, attempts to offer college graduates the knowledge and skills they need in order to live and work *fully* (p. 25, italics added).

The Learning Paradigm

Universities constantly face pressures to prove themselves more relevant to the communities they serve. Ansley and Gaventa (1997) claim that many communities have given up on universities as places where people can gain meaningful assistance (p. 51). Kennedy (1995) agrees, stating that the public is dissatisfied with what many of our colleges are doing (p. 10). It seems urgent for today's universities to redirect their priorities to prove themselves more relevant to community concerns. Local communities have directed criticism towards institutions of higher learning as well, expressing concerns about a variety of issues including student misbehavior in the community, employer dissatisfaction, grade inflation, and even athletic scandals (see Prewitt, 1994, for some interesting examples). Some faculty members even complain about the difficulties of engaging their students in important issues that concern society (Edmundson, 1997, p. 42).

Although most agree that the public's confidence in the university has eroded, too few solutions have been offered. Clearly, some changes are necessary in order to make the American university more connected with, and accountable to, the community at large. The learning paradigm allows educators to apply their "vast knowledge and research resources to the solution of critical societal problems" (Ansley & Gaventa, 1997, p. 46), answering public concerns by encouraging faculty and students to engage in mutually-empowering action in order to understand, respond to, and deepen the commitment to a common good. This answer also helps academe account for what it is doing inside and outside its classrooms.

One possible step toward addressing these public concerns is for administrators, faculty, and students to redirect their efforts towards the learning paradigm. This redirection doesn't necessitate changing the content in the courses we offer, *per se*, but it does certainly change the way we teach courses and address community concerns. In the learning paradigm, education is made more relevant: students learn in significantly different ways, courses are taught in significantly different ways, and faculty members conduct their research in significantly different ways. These changes refocus many of the university's priorities towards societal concerns.

The three steps that I purpose to address these concerns and encourage a shift towards the learning paradigm are as follows:

> (1) faculty members should teach critical thinking skills in all courses in the university curriculum,
> (2) faculty members should incorporate service-learning components into course assignments whenever possible, and
> (3) administrators should encourage faculty to refocus their research to address community concerns.

Critical Thinking Skills

Teachers need to incorporate critical thinking skills into their courses and consider including projects in the curriculum that make direct connections to community concerns. According to Brookfield (1987), "critical thinkers see the future as open and malleable, not as closed and fixed" (p. 5), and Freire (2000/1970), in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, argues that the intellectual act of reflection builds the capacity for authenticity and dialogue, which are key prerequisites of freedom (see also Freire, 1998).

By solving real problems, students validate their authenticity as human beings. They learn to think about their own thinking, reflect on the ways in which they learn and, often most importantly, discover why they fail to learn. Students develop a social imagination in the learning paradigm that makes it possible to question and analyze the world as well as imagine changing it.

Teachers can incorporate in to their courses ways for students to critically reflect on experiences and learning so that they can become more conscious of their values and more cognizant of the ways in which they form values (see also Sapp, 2000). The learning paradigm and the teaching of critical thinking skills encourage college students to become more active learners.

Active learners are better equipped to connect to the world beyond the classroom to what Dewey calls "associated living" (qtd. in Kraft, 1996, p. 133), an intellectual state that connects students in school with real-life problems (see also Dewey, 1916, 1959). This is also related to what Habermas (1979) calls "emancipatory learning," an approach in which learners become more aware of the forces that have brought them to current situations. These learners are then better prepared to take action to change some aspects of their own or others' conditions (Brookfield, 1987, p. 12).

Whether faculty are more drawn to the so-called "critical" or radical pedagogies (e.g., Freire, 1970/2000, 1998; hooks, 1994; McLaren, 2000; Shor, 1996), or the more liberal democratic philosophy (e.g., Barber, 1992; Dewey, 1916, 1959), all of them are concerned with education for citizenship, with creating in students the will and skill to participate in the democratic process as active, engaged agents of change however they define it.

Service-Learning Opportunities

One way in which we, as teachers, can facilitate Habermas' (1979) "emancipatory learning" is through incorporating service-learning components into our courses. Freire (1998), among others, believes that education should be linked not only to the process of knowledge-building but also to community development. In our classes, whenever possible, service to others should be encouraged. Boyer, the former president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, recommends that every student complete a service project as a part of his or her undergraduate degree (Coye, 1997, p. 26). Service learning, according to Kraft (1996), can be used to rebuild "a citizenship ethic in our young people, and to bring more active forms of learning to our schools" (p. 135).

Service learning combines citizenship education, caring, community building, and active pegagogies (p. 135; see also Barber, 1992; Crabtree, 1998) in which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized experiences. A necessary step towards this approach is urging faculty members to work with students on off-campus projects, engaging in more meaningful learning, and having students think, talk, and write about what they experience during service activities. Since, according to Levine, "academics have done a poor job of defining themselves and their work to the public and often even to their own students" (qtd. in Coye, p. 23), this is one way to make connections among students, faculty, administration, and community members.

According to Herzberg (1994), "many students become eager volunteers [in democratic society] after the ice is broken by class projects and they see where they can go, how they can help" (p. 307). Recently, Stanford University has incorporated mandatory service learning into its freshman writing courses (Herzberg, p. 308; Schutz & Gere, 1998, p. 129), but service learning doesn't need to be mandated campus-wide, or even department-wide. Specific departments should not be dedicated to service learning, but instead it should be incorporated into courses from a range of disciplines across campus.

Some departments, like English, may even choose to develop graduate seminars on research and community development or include freshman-level community service in writing programs. Anson (1992), for example, has been one of many teachers who have succeeded in doing this. He developed a course at the University of Minnesota that I participated in as an undergraduate student in 1991 in which students attended lectures while "simultaneously working at one of three local community agencies with missions related to the development of literacy among disenfranchised children and adults" (p. 33). Anson contends that the advantage of hands-on learning is that learning takes place at many levels and in many ways.

Connections to Community Concerns

I do not suggest that community projects should be the primary focus of all courses on campus. In the English department, for example, freshman composition should clearly focus on writing as its first priority. However, the writing that students do in this type of class could certainly be about their experiences of doing community service. Students could think and write about literacy issues while working as tutors at a community center, for example. Students could read, write exploratory essays, and engage with texts such as Freire's (2000/1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Shor's (1996) *When Students Have Power*, and Rose's (1989) *Lives on the Boundary* before tutoring a few hours per week

at an off-campus site.

Then students could write research papers that arise out of these experiences. Herzberg (1994), another teacher who successfully developed courses in English departments that included service-learning components, states that his goal in doing so is not to "facilitate a tutoring experience, but to [help his students] investigate the social and cultural reasons for the existence of illiteracy" (pp. 316-317). He argues that "these efforts belong in the composition class because of the rhetorical as well as the practical nature of citizenship and social transformation" (p. 317). A successful shift to the learning paradigm requires a great deal of coordination among faculty, administrators, community leaders, and students.

As Schutz and Gere (1998) point out, "truly effective and ethical service learning is not easy to initiate" (p. 130), but with dropping enrollment, more competition, less funding, and more responsibility, universities need to take steps to make learning a priority. If students develop social imagination that enables them to question and analyze the world as well as imagine changing it, college graduates will have the knowledge and skills they need in order to live and work fully (Barr & Tagg, 1995).

At the same time that teachers are incorporating critical thinking skills and service-learning opportunities into their courses, university faculty need to shift their research priorities away from the state and market and toward community concerns. This fundamental shift in the research paradigm forces researchers in all disciplines to make their research more relevant to community issues. Instead of conducting research that attempts to show "what is" or "how is," more research should attempt to show "why is" (Tandon, 1981, p. 21).

This alternative research paradigm, often referred to as "participatory research" and/or "action research," requires that researchers study situations in effort to enhance understanding and enable communities to take action to change unjust situations. In this paradigm, "knowledge for the sake of knowing [is] de-emphasized" in favor of knowledge that is directly linked to concrete community-based action (p. 24). Research is evaluated at least partly on its ability to educate community members facing challenges in society, instead of exclusively on its explicating abstract theoretical notions or addressing government or market "needs."

Ansley and Gaventa (1997) offer overviews of some of the hundreds of participatory research projects that some university faculty members are undergoing with community members in the United States (pp. 48-49). In sum, major research funding agencies such as NIH, NSF, and NEH are increasingly supporting research projects with significant community collaborations.

Conclusions: A Call for Change

Faculty and students need administrators to help make this paradigm shift. Administrators need to adapt missions to accommodate the learning paradigm and provide resources to train faculty how to teach critical thinking skills and incorporate service learning into their courses. Grants from agencies such as FIPSE can help support these efforts, but administrators need to restructure the university's system of rewards to accommodate the new models of research and teaching. The reward system is currently skewed towards publishing, and according to many, the quantity of publications is clearly valued over the quality. Faculty members need to be given time for working on problems considered "real" by the community and rewards for doing so.

It is obvious that evaluating publishing accomplishments is easier than evaluating other non-traditional kinds of scholarship like the ones I encourage. However, administrators should rethink their missions in terms of faculty members' broader engagement with the local community. Administrators and

department chairs need to acknowledge that this type of work may take time away from other types of scholarship, and restructure the reward system so that faculty members who attempt this kind of work are not punished if they do not, at the same time, demonstrate the same excellence and productivity in traditional ways. Further, this research might be seen as even more valuable if students are collaborators.

Faculty tenure and hiring committees need to adapt promotion and appointment criteria based on the learning paradigm. Faculty members should be encouraged to incorporate the issues discussed in this paper into their teaching, research, and service. In many cases, committees need to recognize that one project might need to "count" as teaching, research, and service when it comes to annual productivity reports or tenure files. In many cases, community-based research and teaching easily falls under all three categories.

Teaching, traditionally considered the application of issues to human problems; service, traditionally considered contributions to the development of the university and community; and research, traditionally considered professional merit according to accepted channels, need to be redefined more broadly.

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